

How to get and use a marketing experts' advice

Marketing would be so much easier if one could turn to a single expert and get utterly perfect marketing advice straight off. The expert tells you what to do, you do it, and hey presto, the money rolls in.

Trouble is, it never quite works like that.

Imagine this scenario. You get together a collection of people who might buy your product or service. They might be finance directors, elderly people with hearing problems, teachers, GP practice managers, middle-aged householders who are worried about their finances, housing directors in local authorities, buyers in book shops... Absolutely anyone – but the key point is that they are your potential clients.

You show them your new advert. They look, consider, and then say, “yes, that looks good. I’d buy that.” Or the reverse... the point is that they study your piece and give their opinion.

Then, just for good measure, you show the self-same copy which has received the approval of your customers to a marketing expert. This marketing expert then tells you that the piece is totally wrong and cannot possibly work. He/she then gives you a whole series of reasons as to why it will not work and suggests you do exactly the opposite.

How can it possibly be that the “expert” can have one opinion and the potential customers have a totally different opinion?

What’s more, it can work the other way around. The expert comes in first and delivers his/her advert. You then show it to your panel of experts and they say, “I’d never read all that,” or “I’d never buy that.”

And then there’s the contradiction between experts. One says “x” and the other says, “I don’t know who told you to do this, but it is rubbish.”

There are two ways to resolve disputes such as this.

The first is simple – but it costs a little. Produce the advert that your focus group likes, and at the same time produce the advert from the “expert”. Send out both at the same time to a small random selection of addresses, and then measure the response rate (or, if we are looking at email adverts, the click-through rate).

Such an experiment will tell you which advert works best, and you can then proceed.

The only problem is that this approach doesn’t tell you WHY one advert works better than another, and for that you have to take a more complex route.

This alternative, more complex, second approach involves looking at the two ways you have adopted thus far (the focus group and the marketing advice) and trying to understand what exactly is going on.

THE FOCUS GROUP

The first rule with a focus group is that you should never allow the advertiser anywhere near the people who are doing the reviewing. The person handling the group (or the individuals, if you deal with these potential customers individually) must not be seen to be related to the company, otherwise reactions will be changed. People will temper their comments because they are less likely to say something nasty about your advert to your face if they think that you wrote it or if they think it is your product or your company selling it.

So rule one: Have a neutral person run the focus group.

The second rule is that you must only give the person looking at the advert a short amount of time to see the advert before asking for a reaction. This is in order to simulate the real world. Each person in a focus group looking at an advert will try to study the advert, look at it carefully, and reach a considered opinion. And that has nothing to do with how things are in real life.

In the real world we each of us see around 3000 announcements and messages a day, and we are all brilliant at screening out the ones we don't want to study.

However if you say, "I would like you to look carefully at this and tell me what you think," then everything changes, and you do not get a reaction which bears any relationship to the real world.

Second rule: Only show the individual the advert for a short space of time.

Third, don't rely on one small focus group. Focus groups can be dominated by one or two individuals whose opinions lead the group down a certain route. You must run several groups to try to ensure that you overcome the problem of group dominance.

Rule three: Run several quite separate and independent groups.

THE EXPERTS

There are experts and experts, and then again experts. The first thing you need to do is to find out what sort of expert you are talking to.

In broad terms the experts you might come across are:

- a) **Expert graphic designers** – the people who are wizards with designing leaflets, brochures and websites.
- b) **Experts in the field of the psychology of perception.** These people know how an individual sees a leaflet or an email, and what happens

inside their brain at that first moment of impact. And they use this knowledge to create adverts that are read and acted upon.

- c) **Expert copywriters.** The people who know how a minor change of a text (such as a simple paragraph break, the way a headline is written, or the opening four words of a paragraph) can affect response rates.

So it is important to know who one is talking about when it comes to the issue experts.

My view is that the expert in the field of the psychology of perception (our expert “b” above) is the first person you need to consult, and the person whose information you should always listen to.

The psychology of perception studies what happens when an individual sees a piece of paper, an email, a poster, an envelope, or even someone walking across the street.

They point out that the brain does not behave in a common sense way, and we don't see what we might think we see. Different parts of the brain react in different ways according to the input – which is why listening to music or a play on the radio while driving is far less likely to cause an accident than talking on a telephone (even with a hands free kit).

There is so much information in the field of the psychology of perception that we can't even scratch the surface in this little article – but here are a couple of points of interest. One is that the way we see a leaflet depends totally on our state of mind at the time. If the leaflet is something we have requested or something that we have paid to receive, we see it in a totally different way from the way in which we read a leaflet that just arrives unsolicited through the door as what we might call “junk mail”.

This one fact (and it is just one among thousands from this academic field) affects whether a leaflet should have colour and illustrations in it. Colour and illustrations demand a lot more brain power to decode than text only information – simply because to read colour and illustrations you need to use both hemispheres of the brain at once – and that is one of the most complex things the brain can do. If the recipient feels that the leaflet in question is just a piece of junk then he or she won't feel like giving the amount of brain power needed to look at the leaflet.

Here are just a few more snippets from the psychology of perception...

1. The eye invariably starts 25% of the way down the page.
2. Putting a picture next to text reduces effectiveness.
3. Red is a colour that can reduce the effectiveness of adverts.
4. Don't pretend to know the person when you don't.
5. Much of a piece of printed paper is never read – but some of it will be taken in subliminally – and you as an advertiser have to know which bits!

In fact, with a piece of mail or an email that is received out of the blue from someone you don't particularly know, the psychology of perception shows

that text is the best way to get a message across – which is why I would say that my second favourite expert is the copywriter.

It really is true that you can send out two leaflets that are identical in every regard but that one has a different PS from the other and achieve wildly different sales. Copywriters who know their stuff know that most recipients don't read the whole of the sales letter or brochure. So they construct their work in such a way that only certain bits will be read – while some other parts will be taken in subliminally. (Fortunately subliminal advertising is only banned on broadcast media, not in direct mail or email).

Thus occasionally you might hear someone say, "This letter is no good, no one will read all this," and the copywriter will say, "quite right – I don't intend them to."

So having rated the psychologist and the copywriter, I am left with the graphic designer. A very valuable person indeed – but one who needs to do his/her work in accordance with the dictate of the psychologist and the copywriter. Leave a graphic designer on his or her own and you can get something that looks wonderful, but doesn't sell at all.

What happens sometimes, however, is that the designer creates a design which leaves space for the words, without any reference to anyone who knows where the human eye starts working on a sheet of paper or how the brain reacts to different colours.

Pulling it all together

It should now be fairly clear why a report from a focus group can be so different from a report from experts.

The first thing to consider is how the person is reading the information. If you are sending out a mailshot or an email to people who don't really know too much about you, they will only spend a second looking at it before deciding to hit the delete button or throw it in the bin. The person in the focus group will probably study it much more carefully.

Also in the focus group you need to be sure that the focus group is run properly – with several different groups and no one involved who is close to the company.

Given that there are three types of expert you need to be sure you are consulting the right expert at the right time for the right job and in the right order.

Different focus groups and different experts will give you different advice. My suggestion is that before you go down any of this route you decide what sort of expert you want, and how you are going to use him/her.

As I noted above, my view is clear...

- a) Start with the expert on the psychology of perception

- b) Then work with the copy writer
- c) Bring in the designer at the end
- d) Use a focus group last, but make sure you distance yourself from the group and that you use a professional company that does focus groups as its main occupation. You can't pull in a friend to do it for you.

If you would like to know more about any of these areas of work, please do call Hamilton House on 01536 399 000.

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